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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002732

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [PINS](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ORDERS MAJOR OFFENSIVE AGAINST ABU
SAYYAF, REASSERTS DESIRE FOR PEACE

REF: MANILA

Classified By: Charge Paul W. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. In a tough response to August 7-9 clashes on Jolo that left 26 Philippine soldiers and 27 militants dead, President Arroyo ordered a stepped-up offensive against Abu Sayyaf terrorists on the island and directed her Army chief to the front lines to oversee the campaign. Stressing her commitment to the peace process, she insisted the offensive was not an act of vengeance but "a strategy to win the peace" and pledged to "seek peace with those with peaceful intentions." The armed forces chief of staff and the President's top negotiator echoed Arroyo's comments, stating that intensified operations would only focus on "rogue elements" of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) cooperating with Abu Sayyaf and other terrorists. MNLF leaders blamed last week's clashes on the Philippine military and appealed for peace talks and the activation of a joint monitoring committee. Newly appointed Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro has ordered regional and provincial disaster coordinating councils in affected areas to step up relief and evacuation operations for over 10,000 persons displaced by the fighting. Charge plans to meet with the defense secretary Tuesday to discuss the current situation as well as broader plans for the military. End Summary.

Arroyo Transfers Army Headquarters to Zamboanga

¶2. (C) In response to the August 7-9 armed clashes on Jolo that left 26 Philippine soldiers and 27 militants dead, President Arroyo Sunday ordered the temporary transfer of the Philippine Army headquarters in Manila to Zamboanga City to support a major offensive against the Abu Sayyaf Group. "We cannot allow terrorists to hold the South hostage to their agenda of mayhem and blood sport," announced Arroyo. Arroyo also issued an August 11 directive for Army commander General Tolentino to oversee the military campaign from the front line in Mindanao. "The military offensive against the Abu Sayyaf Group must continue," said Arroyo. She called on the army "not just to orchestrate punitive actions against those who wantonly maim and kill, but also to evaluate peaceful overtures of those who will demonstrate remorse." Philippine military forces in Sulu and Basilan provinces now number some 4,000 troops.

Closed-Door Command Conference

¶3. (C) Newly appointed Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro assessed the August 7-9 clashes on Jolo and the security situation within Mindanao during an August 12 closed door

command conference with armed forces chief of staff General Esperon, Tolentino, and other top military officers in Mindanao. Esperon told Teodoro that all road networks and major communications lines are secured, and that "hot pursuit operations against terrorists would continue without let up."

MNLF Claims Responsibility for Attacks

¶4. (C) The MNLF chairman's chief spokesman, Alamarin Tillah, told poloff August 13 that six MNLF members were killed and three wounded during the August 7-9 armed clashes in Indanan, Parang, and Maimbung. Tillah attributed the outbreak of violence to the intrusion of Philippine military forces into MNLF territory without prior coordination. If such intrusions do not stop, said Tillah, "all hell will break loose." To prevent further violence, Tillah recommended activation of a government-MNLF joint monitoring committee, and convening of the tripartite conference in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to review implementation of the 1996 final peace agreement. Tillah noted that a 7-person MNLF delegation would travel to Jakarta August 15 to discuss the venue of the conference with senior Indonesian officials.

¶5. (C) According to Presidential Advisor on the Peace Process Jesus Dureza and armed forces chief Esperon, the Philippine military offensive will not be directed at the MNLF as an organization, but only toward those "rogue elements" who are cooperating with the ASG and other terrorists.

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Relief Assistance Underway for Displaced Persons

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¶6. (C) Sulu Governor Abdusakur Tan estimated that over 10,000 persons were displaced during the recent fighting on Jolo. Defense Secretary Teodoro ordered regional and provincial disaster coordinating councils in affected areas to step up relief and evacuation operations. Nongovernmental organizations, the Red Cross, and government social workers are currently providing food and other supplies to displaced persons in four evacuation centers in Indanan, Parang, and Maimbung. Governor Tan prohibited the use of classrooms for evacuees to avoid disruptions in educational services.

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